

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 12 February 2017

No. T0976

Speaker: Mr. Stephen Thomson

I Myself: The I's of Philippians 3:4-14

Today we come to the third and final talk in the present series entitled, I Myself. We have considered in the previous two talks the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 7:1-25 and in Galatians 2:18-21 where he speaks of his personal experience of the Christian life for the benefit of his readers. How we take encouragement that the struggles we have with the flesh (that is the old nature) are the same struggles which the Apostle had, and which caused him to cry, "*O wretched man that I am!*" (Romans 7:24). We can all say with him, "*I am crucified with Christ*" (Galatians 2:20), for that is indeed the true position of every believer, but the apostle could go on to say that, "*Christ liveth in me*" (Galatians 2:20). Although that is also the true position of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, I wonder how much of Christ we display in our lives?

The Apostle Paul was an outstanding example of one through whom Christ was seen. In fact he could say, "*For to me to live is Christ...*" (see Philippians 1:21). No doubt his secret was that he had a tremendous appreciation of the fact that the Son of God loved him and had given Himself for him. If we are believers on the Lord Jesus Christ, we do well to meditate upon his words in Galatians 2:20 and apply them to ourselves, "*... the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me*".

Now we come to the passage before us today which is Philippians 3:4-14. Normally I would not read the passage, but since our talk is based on the I's of these eleven verses, I thought I would make an exception today. I have counted fifteen times in these eleven verses where Paul says 'I'.

Let's read Philippians 3:4-9 together at this point and we will read Philippians 3:10-14 after we have said something about these. "*Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith*" (Philippians 3:4-9).

In Philippians 3:1-3, the Apostle encourages the Philippian believers to "*Rejoice in the Lord*". This has a greater impact on us when we realise that Paul himself was a prisoner of Nero at this time. He was not in the best of circumstances, but his heart was rejoicing in the Lord, and his concern was for the Christians in the regions round about. He wrote the letters (or epistles) to the believers at Ephesus, Colosse and Philippi from prison. He also wrote a personal letter of entreaty to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus as a prisoner. Paul had learned not only to be content in whatever circumstances he found himself (see Philippians 4:11) but also to use the circumstances for the furtherance of the Gospel (see Philippians 1:12). How thankful we are that Paul wrote these letters and that we have them preserved for us in the New Testament!

There were dangers, and Paul was concerned for the spiritual welfare of the believers at Philippi. Both Gentile and Jewish teachers were bringing evil doctrine which would appeal to the fleshly mind but lead hearts away from Christ. We do well to recognise that the flesh (that is the old nature) is always opposed to the Spirit and, if we are not careful, we will suffer loss in the things of God by allowing flesh to have a place. Paul warns them (as he does us) to "*have no confidence in the flesh*" (Philippians 3:2-3). He then goes on to outline what has often been called his "profit and loss" account. In Philippians 3:4-6, he lists the things which naturally appeared to be gain (or profit) to him but which he had concluded were loss! These were things which, as a natural man, he could boast in, but through grace he could say, "*But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world*" (see Galatians 6:14). In fact, in these verses he goes further and describes these naturally appealing and desirable things as "dung" or "refuse" in order that he might win (or gain) Christ. We will say more about that later.

But first we have the Apostle's pedigree in Philippians 3:4-6. Paul had more to boast about, or have confidence in, than most other men as far as his upbringing was concerned. He could trace his lineage back to Benjamin, the one

who was named by his father Israel, "the son of my right hand" (see Genesis 35:18). You'll remember that Benjamin was the second son of Rachael, younger brother to Joseph and much loved by his father. Paul's name of course was Saul before his conversion (see Acts 13:9) and it is interesting that Saul (the first king of Israel) was also a Benjaminite (see 1 Samuel 9:1). The tribe of Benjamin joined with Judah when the kingdom was divided after Solomon's reign came to an end. I understand that Jerusalem (the city of David) is situated in the area of the Promised Land associated with the tribe of Benjamin. So you can see just how proud he could be about being a Benjaminite! He had been circumcised on the eighth day according to the Jewish custom and had the physical mark of being an Israelite (see Genesis 17:9-14). He calls himself a "*Hebrew of the Hebrews*" (Philippians 3:5). He wasn't a convert to Judaism but he was raised (no doubt by both sides of the family) as a Jew. He was 'born and bred'. It is almost certain that Paul would speak Hebrew or Aramaic, the traditional languages of the Jewish nation, the languages of the Old Testament. This would set him apart from other Jews, some who were Greek speaking and naturally would give him something else to be proud about. He could boast in his heritage.

The law of Moses applied to every Jewish man, woman and child, but the Pharisees were particular devotees of the law. They set themselves apart to learn and keep the law and instruct others. In the Gospels, we see that there was a lot of pride and hypocrisy connected with the Pharisees and the Lord Himself condemns them for that (see Luke 18:9-14). But there were some Pharisees who evidently really strived to live a godly life. Nicodemus (see John 3:1-21, John 7:45-52 and John 19:38-42) would be a good example of such, as well as Gamaliel (see Acts 5:33-42) who was Paul's teacher (see Acts 22:3). Paul was a Pharisee, expert in the law and traditions of the Jews and his zeal was demonstrated in the way he persecuted the early Christian church. So blinded was he by Jewish tradition that he was determined to stamp out the name of Christ (see Acts 9:1-2). But all that was changed when he heard the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ speaking from heaven to him as he made his way to Damascus, "*I am Jesus whom thou persecutest*" (Acts 9:5), and with these words, Paul was convicted and converted to Christ. He never forgot the mercy which was shown to him (the chief of sinners, as he later describes himself, see 1 Timothy 1:15), and he writes in his letter to Timothy, "*I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*" (1 Timothy 1:13).

So to summarise these three verses from Philippians 3:4-6, Paul could have counted as gain (or profit) his heritage as a Benjaminite, his position as a Pharisee and his zeal in the pursuit of what he believed to be true but, having found Christ, all these things were counted as loss. You'll notice that not only had Paul counted these things as loss in the past, he continued to count all things but loss, "*for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ*" (Philippians 3:8).

Now we are considering in our talk today the fact that Paul says, 'I', over and over again. You see, it's personal for Paul. Usually we are told not to talk much about ourselves, and certainly as we seek to teach the Scriptures amongst the people of God, we do well to remember that. I think we can rightly question preachers or teachers who are always talking about themselves, but sometimes there is no substitute for personal experience. If we read the words Paul wrote in the previous chapter concerning vainglory and lowliness of mind, and setting before his readers the great example of humility in Christ Jesus Himself, "*Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation (or emptied himself), and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*", (Philippians 2:6-8) there can be no question of the Apostle's motive in speaking about himself in this section. He is speaking of his own personal experience to encourage us to follow his example. This is borne out in Philippians 3:15 when, after he has spoken of himself so often as 'I', he then says, "*Let us therefore, as many as be perfect [or mature], be thus minded...*" Paul wants his personal experience to be ours too!

I wonder how we measure up? How much pride do we have in the natural things we consider to be gain? Our background; our upbringing; our natural intellect or qualifications; our talents; our resources etc. Paul doesn't suggest that the things he had naturally were not gain to him. He says clearly that they "*were gain*" (Philippians 3:7) but the point is that, compared to gaining (or winning) Christ, he regarded these things as loss.

Now, of course the Apostle had Christ. The moment he repented of his sins and surrendered to Jesus on the Damascus road, he had Christ. But his desire was that he might win Christ. Not only did he desire the "*excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus [his] Lord*" (Philippians 3:8), but he wanted to know Him in the fullest possible way. He wanted there to be nothing which could possibly crowd out Christ Jesus from his life. I often find myself quoting hymns during these talks and here is one by Samuel O'Malley Cluff which seems to catch exactly the spirit of the Apostle Paul in these verses:

*Nothing but Christ, as on we tread,
The Gift unpriced, God's living Bread;
With staff in hand and feet well shod,
Nothing but Christ - the Christ of God.*

*Everything loss for Him below,
Taking the cross where'er we go;
Showing to all, where once He trod,
Nothing but Christ - the Christ of God.*

*Nothing save Him, in all our ways,
Giving the theme for ceaseless praise;
Our whole resource along the road,
Nothing but Christ - the Christ of God.*

Having expressed his desire to “win” Christ, Paul speaks of being “found” in Him in relation to the righteousness of faith. Paul recognised that if he was to be viewed as righteous before God, it would only be as he was found in Christ and not according to the works of the law, which he tells us elsewhere “are dead”. Are we guilty of thinking that we can stand before God in our own righteousness? We do well to remind ourselves of the words of the prophet Isaiah when he says, *“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags”* (see Isaiah 64:6). If the Apostle Paul had no confidence in the flesh, (Philippians 3:4) neither should we! We can rejoice, too, that Christ is our righteousness (Philippians 3:9).

You will notice that Paul refers to the Lord Jesus as Christ and Christ Jesus in Philippians 3:4-9 and not Jesus Christ. Why do I say that? Well, I think it is of importance to realise that whilst Jesus, and Jesus Christ speak to us of the lowly Man who was in this world, Christ and Christ Jesus speak of His risen, glorified place at God's right hand in heaven. It has been said that ‘Jesus speaks of grace’, but ‘Christ speaks of glory’. I like that! Paul is drawing our attention to the fact that we as believers of this age (or dispensation) are associated with the One who is risen and who is in glory, as a glorified Man rather than the One who was found as a lowly Man in this world. We learn that truth from the Lord Himself when, in resurrection, He said to Mary, *“Touch me not”* (John 20:17). There was a new condition to the relationship between the Lord and the disciples and we have been brought into that blessed relationship too. In his letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul reminds them (even if they did know the Man Jesus Christ) that henceforth they knew Him not after the flesh (see 2 Corinthians 5:16).

Now let us read together the Philippians 3:10-14, *“That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”*

To “win” Christ, to be “found” in Him and to “know” Him. These were the heart desires of the Apostle. Are these our true desires? Let me quote part of a hymn this time by James George Deck, (1807-1884)

*Saviour, we long to follow Thee,
Do Thou our hearts prepare,
And count all else, whate'er it be,
Unworthy of our care.*

*Thy life is now beyond the grave;
Our souls Thou hast set free;
Life, strength, and grace in Thee we have,
And we are one with Thee.*

*O teach us so the power to know
Of risen life with Thee;
Not we may live while here below,
But Christ our life may be.*

These desires were true of the Apostle Paul, and he would have them to be true of us.

I want you to note that twice in these verses, in Philippians 3:10-11, Paul speaks of the resurrection. First he speaks of the *“power of his [that is Christ's] resurrection”* (Philippians 3:10) and then he speaks of the *“resurrection of the dead”* or *“from among the dead”*, (Philippians 3:10). I think we should consider carefully what he is saying as in between these two mentions of resurrection he speaks of the *“fellowship of his sufferings”* (Philippians 3:10) and *“being conformed to his death”* (Philippians 3:10).

Paul was a chosen vessel to preach the Gospel but also to suffer for the sake of Christ. (We can read that in Acts 9:15). And how Paul suffered! He lists his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:22-33 where we read, *"Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness"* (2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

Paul certainly had fellowship in the sufferings which the Lord experienced during His lifetime, but we must be clear. Neither Paul nor anyone else could have fellowship or a part in the vicarious sufferings of Christ, that it, His sufferings on the behalf of others. These sufferings were for sins not His own. We need to always remember that the sufferings of Christ for sin and sins could only be entered into by that Perfect Man who had come into the world as the *"Lamb of God"* (see John 1:29, 36). As we know, Paul would ultimately lose his life as a martyr for his Lord and Master but he was confident that he would partake in the resurrection of life. The force of the Darby's New Translation rendering *"from among the dead"* or *"dead ones"* (Philippians 3:11), is that the believers who *"fall asleep through Jesus"* (see 1 Thessalonians 4:14), will be raised at the Lord's coming for His church, from amongst the dead. The unbelieving dead will then be raised at a later time, but they will be raised to judgement, to stand before Christ at the great white throne (see Revelation 20:11-15).

But before Paul speaks of suffering, death and resurrection from among the dead (Philippians 3:11), which is the natural order, he speaks of the *"power of his resurrection"* (Philippians 3:10). Paul wanted to know the liberating power of Christ's resurrection which had taken Christ beyond this earth and everything associated with it into the heavenly realms of glory. The writer to the Hebrews could say concerning Christ's present position, *"For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens"* (Hebrews 7:26). The Apostle John says *"As he is, so are we in this world"* (1 John 4:17). The hymn writer caught the spirit of what Paul desired as we have already quoted,

*O teach us so the power to know
Of risen life with Thee;
Not we may live while here below,
But Christ our life may be.*

James George Deck (1807-1884)

However noble Paul's desires were, he recognised that he had not reached perfection. Be very careful of any who give the impression that they *"have arrived"* in the things of God. The Christian pathway is a daily journey and, like Paul, we need to follow after, reach forth and *"press toward the goal and prize of the high (or upward) calling of God in Christ Jesus"* (see Philippians 3:14). Our calling is a *"holy calling"* (2 Timothy 1:9) and a *"heavenly calling"* (Hebrews 3:1) but it is in Philippians 3:14 described as a *"high [upward] calling."* Beloved saint of God, heaven is our home!

Our time is almost gone, but I must just say a word on the expression Paul uses, *"apprehended of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:12) It is a powerful expression which has the thought that the Lord Jesus Christ had taken complete control of him. Just as a person apprehended by the police is entirely at the mercy of the arresting officer, Paul was entirely at the will of his Saviour and Lord whilst seeking to live out the answer to his life changing question, *"Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"* (Acts 9:6).

Perhaps the things that are past can be a snare to us (both successes and failures, as I believe this is what is alluded to in these verses) but we are to forget the things which are behind and stretch out to the things which are before. I do trust that the consideration of these I's of Paul in Philippians will be both an encouragement and a challenge to us.

May God bless you all.

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